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THE PROBLEMS IN RESEARCH
WITHIN JUVENILE CORRECTIONS

Laura Egerton
University of Richmond

The research included in this evaluation had to meet two criteria. First, it had to be indexed in the 1980 or 1981 Sociological Abstracts of Social Source Citation Index. The research must also have been conducted in a correctional institution or in a diversion program. A diversion program is a community-based therapy program dealing primarily with status and first offenders. The goals of the program vary, but focus primarily on prevention of delinquency through early intervention. Of the over one hundred articles reviewed, only thirty met the criteria. The studies not included focused primarily upon either delinquents on probation or high school students and the prediction of delinquency. Many of the articles were descriptions of various treatment approaches rather than an evaluation of their success.

Problems within corrections can be best divided into those which result from the choices of the researcher and those which stem from the setting of the study. The researcher must decide the best possible method of testing his hypothesis within the constrictions of the institution. He must adequately define the independent and dependent variables so that others

reading the study will be able to replicate the findings. Studies involving an evaluation of treatment programs must describe the programs with enough specific details to facilitate comparisons. They should include control groups which adequately eliminate differences created by variables other than the treatment program. The researcher has to be particularly careful when deciding upon the dependent variables. Adequate measures of behavior are particularly difficult to discover because there are so many complications. Tests must measure the criteria accurately, using a format which can be understood. Interviews and self-report data should be validated with alternative measures and official records. Any court statistics should be adequately defined with a thorough understanding of the methods of calculation. After the researcher has met as many possible obstacles as he can in designing the experiment, he must consider the setting of the research. If the institution is not committed to research, then the study will be difficult to complete. Since random subject selection is difficult to achieve, the researcher should attempt to mitigate as many of the negative consequences of this bias in his design. Finally, if he wishes to gain the support of the institution, he must evaluate his research in terms of both its relevance to those involved and the cost-effectiveness of the treatment. Research within the correctional system involves an inter-relationship between the researcher and the institution.

The first step in experimental research design is deciding upon the independent and dependent variables. The

problem in research in corrections primarily results from the lack of specific definitions for the independent variables and appropriate measures of the dependent variables. The independent variable is that variable which is manipulated by the experimenter to hopefully produce a change in the dependent variable. In defining the independent variable, the researcher must insure that others reading the study will be able to replicate the findings. Unfortunately, for every correctional institution, there is a different approach to therapy. However, an accurate definition of the treatment program is particularly important in evaluation research to facilitate comparison. Another problem in defining the independent variable is insuring that behavior changes are a result of the variable. When evaluating ongoing treatment programs, the researcher is more certain that change results from the treatment because it can be examined over a considerable length of time. However, studies involving new methods of treatment are complicated by their short duration which could result in a Hawthorne effect. The adolescents may be responding to the special attention rather than the treatment itself.

The importance of defining the independent variable is particularly evident in evaluation of diversional programs. Diversional programs are a relatively new branch of corrections, so there is no guideline for uniformity in treatment approaches. Therefore, an accurate description of the program is imperative if comparisons are to be made. In this review, there were six studies on diversional programs. However, three of these

studies lacked a definition for their diversion programs. According to Wright (1977), this lack of specific descriptions of the program was one of the major problems he encountered in his review of diversion studies. Palmer et al. in the study on juvenile diversion (1980) evaluated several different programs. However, they failed to describe the programs which limited the applicability of his findings. Palmer concluded that success of a diversion program depends upon the quality of the staff, funding and amount of time spent with the youth. Lipsey et al. (1981) evaluated a diversion program and found it did not lower recidivism and it actually increased the number of youths involved in the juvenile justice system. Higgins (1978) and Spengel (1981) found similar negative effects. However, does the reader assume these programs did not meet one of Palmer's criteria for success or that diversion is not helpful? One cannot make a definitive statement concerning these three studies because of the lack of description of the programs given by the researcher.

The dilemma of diversion in juvenile justice is the new issue for correctional institutions. Based on the research, however, it would be very difficult to determine the successful elements of the programs if any. Part of the problem in defining the independent variable is simple practicality. Robert Coates (1978) in his study of the Massachusetts correctional system defined the treatment programs extensively. His study was

published as a book because of the necessary details he evaluated and described.

The problems in defining the treatment program became magnified when examining research in correctional institutions. The therapies are more diverse as well as the environment under which they are applied. Whereas diversional programs are community-based, treatment in correctional institutions can range from a minimum security community institution to a maximum security juvenile prison. Of the eight studies reviewed, none of the treatment approaches resemble one another in goals or method, thus rendering comparison impossible. Also, many of the researchers failed to describe the programs in enough depth so those individuals who wish to compare similar models can do so. For the purposes of this review, the research will be divided into evaluation of on-going vs new treatment approaches because the problems which each category encounters is different.

The researcher involved in programs which are a part of the institution often assumes that the reader is familiar with this treatment approach so he fails to describe it adequately. However, the program which is being evaluated may not be typical of others using this approach to therapy. For example, Collingwood et al. (1980) and Lukin (1981) compared recidivism rates of juveniles after a skills training treatment program. However, the specific programs were not described so one cannot determine the successful elements of skills training upon delinquents. The reader must assume both authors are referring

to a work and social skills training program, but there is no definition of what this training entails. Collingwood et al. (1980) concluded that successful treatment depended upon prior skill level with those delinquents who have lower work and social skills having the higher recidivism rates. Lukin (1981) concluded that treatment success depended upon the interaction of the personality traits of the delinquent and the therapy goals. This interaction effect was also found in a study by Brill (1978). Brill analyzed the success of structured versus non-structured institutions as it relates to the maturity level of the adolescent. He concluded that the more mature the adolescent, the more flexible the program should be in effecting behavior change.. However, Brill also failed to define the criteria for structured versus non-structured institutions. The reader would find it difficult to assign delinquents to appropriate institutions without a comprehensive definition of both maturity level and institutional structure.

There were two studies which effectively defined the independent variable. Druckman (1979) studied the success rate of family therapy on juvenile recidivism and found no significant change. She defined the therapy program along one of the prominent family treatment models, giving references as well as a detailed description of her application of the therapy. Ollendick et al. (1980) examined the effects of locus of control upon a behavior modification program. The behavior modification program was clearly defined, thus making their conclusions more

readily justified. The authors found that those delinquent with an internal locus of control responded more to the program goals both during treatment and one year later. Both of these studies simplified replication of their findings and comparisons with other studies because of their clear explanations.

Other studies involving evaluation of treatment programs focused on new approaches to therapy rather than on-going treatment. Johnson and Nelson (1978) dealt with the effects of game playing on delinquents. The authors used games designed to facilitate rapport between the delinquents and the counselors. They found that the games increased the juveniles' willingness to communicate. Fryear et al. (1977) studied the effects of photographed social interactions upon the delinquents' self-concept. The final study by Kane and Alley (1980) dealt with the school instruction rather than therapy at a correctional institution. Since education is an integral part of the institutional program, this study was included as a treatment program. Kane et al. found that peer tutors were as effective as teachers in instruction on computational mathematics. Although these three studies defined their treatment programs extensively, their simplicity complicates the long-term effectiveness. Programs of this nature cannot eliminate a possible Hawthorne effect because they are not a part of an on-going treatment. The subjects may have been responding to being treated differently from others in the institution. This effect can be eliminated by having a second control group which goes through a placebo therapy which is similar to the actual treatment and is

presented as a "new treatment program." Short-term treatment evaluations are complicated even further by their subject choice, since many of the studies could not randomly select those juveniles who would be involved. This problem will be dealt with more extensively in later sections.

Whereas the problem of defining independent variables is usually limited to evaluation studies, the choosing of appropriate dependent variable measures involves all correctional research. The goal of the dependent variable is to adequately measure the effects of the independent variable. There are three primary methods of measurement -- tests such as the 16 PF, court statistics such as recidivism, and interviews with both personnel and the subjects to determine behavior change. All three methods have both positive and negative consequences in correctional research.

Tests of either attitude or behavior change are probably used more frequently. However, testing of juvenile delinquents poses many problems which the researcher must deal with. Studies involving tests of attitude change have sometimes found that this change may not result in behavior changes (Emler et al., 1978; McGuirk et al., 1978; Druckman, 1979). For example, in the study by Druckman (1979), the author found that the families who completed the therapy program scored lower on their evaluations of family problems. However, there was no difference between the families who completed the program and those who did not on recidivism rates and actual number of problems effectively handled by the family. The

The researcher must decide if the test is relevant to treatment goals for a change in behavior. Another problem in testing is deciding whether the tests measure the criteria which they are designed to measure. In a study on moral reasoning by Emler, Heather and Winton (1978), the authors concluded that their failure to find significant differences between delinquents and matched populations resulted from poorly developed tests. The authors felt that the tests could not discriminate between people at the lower levels of moral reasoning. In addition to poor discrimination, there have been studies which show that tests can be culturally biased. In a study by Harp and Smith (1980), the authors concluded even the Culture Fair IQ tests were biased, although less so than the standard Wisc-R.

Another problem with standardized tests is that they may be too complicated for the adolescent to understand. For example, in a study by Peter Heyas et al. (1978), the authors used only eleventh and twelfth graders because of the reading level demanded by the tests. This selection probably biased the results of the study because it was on moral development. There might be a difference between those adolescents who can read because they have stayed in school and those who cannot in their moral reasoning. A study by McGurk et al. (1978) had to eliminate those delinquents who could not read. This study focused on the variables which contribute to recidivism and found that those delinquents who could not read had significantly higher recidivism. Because they eliminated those adolescents

who could not read, the authors mitigated the applicability of their determination of other variables which contribute to recidivism. A study by Terrell and Taylor (1980) effectively avoided this problem by having the questions administered orally. However, this does not eliminate the problem if the questions are too complicated for the juvenile to understand, and with a large battery of tests, this process is too time consuming.

Many authors attempted to avoid the problems of standardized tests by developing their own (Johnson et al., 1978; Terrell and Taylor, 1980; Winfree and Wolfe, 1980; Zingraff and Zingraff, 1980; and Streit, 1981), or changing the format of the tests (Johnson et al., 1978; McGurk et al., 1978; Mannle and Lewis, 1979; Hudak et al., 1980; Heyns et al., 1981). Both methods raise the questions of validity and reliability. If the authors shorten the standardized tests because of the delinquents' short attention span, they lose the reliability and validity of the test. If they develop their own test, there is no analysis of the test to insure validity and reliability.

Another possible complication in testing is the environment in which the tests are administered. Testing at the institution can be stressful to adolescents, especially if they perceive it to be connected to how long they will be incarcerated. A study by Voorhees (1981) compared the neuropsychological differences between incarcerated and matched adolescents. The testing was complicated by the differences in the testing situation. The control subjects were tested in their home

with their parents after an extensive explanation of their purpose. The delinquents were tested at their institution, which would be a more stressful situation. The author stated that the control subjects were "more deliberate in their responses" (p. 61). The control subjects could have been more involved in the study than the delinquents because of the testing and this could have accounted for the better performance.

Another method of measuring change is Youth Authority statistics, particularly recidivism rates. Most studies use recidivism rates in conjunction with other measures. Recidivism is a very practical measure of treatment effects since the goal of treatment is delinquency prevention. However, recidivism measurement lacks a uniform definition and is mitigated by the methods courts use in determining the statistic.

Recidivism can be defined in terms of length of freedom from recidivism ranging from one month to two years after treatment.¹ In the studies reviewed, only one looked at recidivism beyond one year. It can be further complicated by the author's definition of what constitutes recidivism. Is it conviction of another crime, breaking parole or being brought before the courts regardless of conviction? Choosing any one of these alters the statistics drastically.. In addition, authors may change their definition of recidivism after the results have been analysed from number of reconvictions to seriousness of offense or vice versa.² This violates the standards of ethical scientific research. Recidivism may also be effected by how closely the agency maintains contact with the youth. Those programs with

a stricter policy may result in higher recidivism because they have been harder on the juveniles. Some programs may follow the experimental subjects more, causing a non-significant result in reduced recidivism.³ The problem for those reviewing the studies is the lack of stated definition used by the researcher. Out of the twelve studies which used recidivism as a dependent variable, only five defined recidivism at all. These five defined recidivism in terms of specific behavior, i.e., court appearance without considering the further complications of the measure. The other studies simply stated they were using recidivism as a measure of behavior change, leaving the reader to guess what they mean. Another problem with this measure is the court system itself. If a juvenile turns eighteen, he is no longer considered a part of the Youth Authority Statistics if he is arrested. Therefore, a large percentage of recidivists never get counted because they are a part of the adult system. Finally, recidivism reduction may not mean rehabilitation. Statistics have shown that blacks are more likely to be arrested as well as those of a lower socioeconomic status. This bias may affect the treatment success especially if the subjects were not representative of the total population. Court statistics may show who got caught, not who changed their behavior.⁴

The third measure used in defining the dependent variable is the self-report questionnaire and interview. These methods are utilized by the researcher to avoid the complications of testing and the inaccuracies of official statistics. The

debate over the reliability of self-report methods is extensive and lacks a definitive conclusion. It is often easier to fabricate information on a questionnaire than it is during an interview, so the interview is used more often. In this review, a study by Hardt and Petersen-Hordt (1977) found that the self-report questionnaire was a valid and accurate measure. However, this study is questionable because of the methods employed. The authors gave "anonymous" questionnaires to the delinquents on their criminal behavior and then matched the individual answer sheet to official data. Matching the answer sheets is questionable both in accuracy and ethical considerations. Since the accuracy of any self-report data is questionable, most studies use this information as one of many measures of behavior.

The interview can be a more accurate method of evaluation when obtaining self-report data, but it has some constraints as well. Many of the studies reviewed did not specify what format the interview took or under what conditions. For example, Terrel and Taylor (1980) conducted a study on the self-concept of black juveniles who only commit crimes against other blacks. The interviews for gathering the history of the juveniles' criminal actions occurred while the juvenile was in jail awaiting trial. Since this is a highly stressful period, the accuracy of this self-report data and thus the entire study could be biased. Another study by Drake, Stewart and Morgan (1980) analysed the career maturity of juvenile delinquents, based upon an analysis of the differences between job expectations

and job skills. The authors based their analysis of job preference upon one job position preference. This study also determined the juveniles' vocational potential by using a questionnaire. Since an individual may limit his report to those skills he has already developed, this may not be highly accurate. This study could have benefited from an in-depth interview where they would have gotten a more accurate understanding of the juveniles' job preference and vocational potential. It is important that the interview be extensive and under relaxed conditions. The researcher should also specify the details of the interview method when it is used as a measure of behavior change.

After designing the experiment, the statistics which will be used by the researchers should be decided. However, often it appears that authors have changed their statistical methods to facilitate significant results. Researchers have used correlation to prove causation because it is often more difficult to use definitive statistical analysis. Several of the studies used an analysis of variance in their research, but they did not report using an Fmax to insure equal variance within the treatment groups. Since subject assignment can not always be random, it is also important to determine if the groups are different before the treatment begins. A pre-test comparison would be an effective method of determining if differences exist. None of the studies reported testing for differences between the groups, however. Also, there is still a debate over whether or not the data is interval level of measurement, thus meeting a requirement of this statistical method. Several studies used regression and

factor analysis in determining aspects of behavior. However, very few stated the details of the analysis, leaving the reader to guess how it was performed. A final problem in the statistical analyses involves those studies using several different raters of behavior. For example, in a study by Penny Lukin (1981), several different raters of personality and behavior are used, ranging from the researcher, a trained psychologist, to supervisors of the delinquents who are often hired for their physical appearance. Yet, as in many studies of this type, no inter-rater correlation was given. This omission could mitigate any significant differences found in the research. Statistical analysis is the responsibility of the researcher and an invalid analysis eliminates any significant findings.

The problems in correctional research addressed in this review until now have been a result of the choices of the researchers. However, correctional research occurs in institutions where there are other goals besides research which might conflict. In designing the experiment, the researcher must sometimes compromise the accuracy of the design to accomodate conflicts with the institution. The necessity for compromise is evident in any field experiment. The problems are evident in subject selection, involvement of the employees of the institution and conflicts with other institutional programs. The researcher must be creative in dealing with the schedules of the institution when designing effective research.

Random selection of subjects is very important because it helps eliminate alternative explanations for differences between the groups resulting from the independent variable. However, often the institution only allows "model" delinquents to participate in experiments for security purposes and as a reward for behavior. Also, the law now requires for all participation in research to be voluntary. Voluntary participation can create problems when the researcher is interested in comparing delinquent and nondelinquent populations. For example, a study by Hudak, Andre and Allan (1979) analysed the difference in social values for delinquent and nondelinquent adolescents. Since participation in the study was voluntary, there were only sixteen subjects from each group. Although matching was attempted, it was not completely successful because the researchers could not control which subjects participated. Therefore, the differences in social values could have resulted from factors other than delinquency. The problem of voluntary participation is complicated even further because those delinquents who volunteer to participate are probably different from those who do not. They may be more motivated to change their behavior or have it look like they are. Also, many of the delinquents drop out or are sent home before the research is completed. In a study attempted by this researcher, over half of the subjects dropped out or were sent home before the six-week study was completed. This complication can mitigate the generalizability and validity of the results. Subjects who continue in the program because they are interested

in the treatment or have not completed their program of rehabilitation are different from those subjects who leave. For example, a study by Mannle and Lewis (1979) examined the socialization process of juveniles within the institution as a function of race. They found that blacks were higher in socialization and justification for behavior than whites. However, the researchers did not consider the effects of length of incarceration upon socialization. They did all of the testing on one day. Therefore, they were including in the sample adolescents who had been at the institution for varied amounts of time regardless of race. There is a possibility that more of the whites had been at the institution for a shorter period of time. The bias would have been difficult to avoid since the nature of the juvenile justice system results in rapid turnover. Only those studies using longitudinal data can eliminate this bias, but this choice is not always practical.

Community-based institutions create a different problem in subject selection. These programs generally deal only with adolescents who have committed status offenses because the courts use these institutions for these adolescents. This subject bias can limit the generalizability of any research results obtained from these programs. For example, Fred Streit (1981) attempted to demonstrate that adolescents' perceptions of family interactions are a good predictor of delinquency. He compared the delinquents with adolescents from the community who were clients of the day clinic but had no record of delinquency. These adolescents could have been involved in delinquency but

not caught. Both of these problems in subject selection limit the validity of this predictor of adolescent delinquency to only those involved in minor offenses. Another community-based treatment evaluation conducted by Higgins (1978) developed problems in keeping the experimental and control group separate. Like many other programs, the authors could not refuse treatment to someone because of the research. Also, in the process of evaluating the program, the authors discovered that many of the control subjects had been accidentally served by the advocates because they had come in contact with them. Others in the experimental group, although assigned an advocate, were never helped. This study ran into additional problems since the authors could not control for outside help such as family counseling. This problem is particularly evident in community-based treatment programs because they do not always control the total environment of the adolescents. The courts send a biased subject selection and they don't always agree on this selection. This is further complicated by the community involvement in the clients. In a study by Lundahl and Mishra (1979), the authors used college students as advisors to the adolescents which lowered recidivism. However, since it was a new program, the courts referred only adolescents with very minor offenses to the center. this bias weakened the applicability of the findings.

Random assignment of subjects is virtually impossible in juvenile correctional research unless it is done as a part of the

intake process. This method insures all juveniles are tested and the tests are usually more reliable because the adolescents are more involved in intake testing. This form of measurement requires less involvement on the part of the institution as well since it is a part of their scheduled evaluation. Unfortunately, since research cannot always conform to institutions, subject bias may be an inevitable complication.

A second problem of research design which cannot always be avoided is the commitment of the correctional institution to research. The institution must support research by being open to change and giving the researcher access to whatever he needs. In several studies, the researchers mentioned subjects who were not tested before they left because supervisors forgot. In a study conducted by this author, one cottage manager who had been openly opposed to research never tested any of the subjects who were sent home despite several reminders. Often, the upper levels of management may be committed to research, but there is a breakdown in communication when the proposal is given to the supervisors. They may perceive the project as an order from above which will increase their workload with little relevance to their jobs. The research may also be biased by programs at the institution. For example, in the study by Adams (1978) on reinforcement, the results were mitigated by a counseling program on being independent of others' influence. This program may have weakened the importance of social ties as a reinforcement for the juveniles. Also, since incarceration leads

to isolation, a peer within an institution may not be a powerful social tie for the juvenile. A final problem in research is the cost-effectiveness of the program being evaluated. Some programs may be impractical because they actually increase the cost of treating juvenile delinquents with limited success. In a study by Bonstedt (1978), the author analysed eleven diversion projects along three criteria -- cost, reduction in recidivism, and number of clients diverted from the justice system. He found that all of the programs actually increased the cost because they increased the number of juveniles served. Another study by Fryear et al. (1977) increased the self-concept of delinquents through photographs of their positive social interactions. This program would be impractical to attempt in most institutions because of the cost. For research to succeed in the field of corrections, the studies must be cost-effective in order to maintain the support of the institution.

Some of the most important studies in corrections involve evaluation of treatment programs. If the success or failure of a program cannot be determined, progress in treating delinquency will be difficult, if not impossible. The two primary methods of evaluation research are the goals-model and the systems-model. The goals-model evaluates the institution in terms of its achievement of service goals such as improved self-concept and lowered recidivism. It is a linear evaluation of success based upon criteria established by the researcher and the institution, depending upon who is primarily sponsoring the research. The systems-model approach, although used less

frequently, is broader in its evaluation. This approach incorporates the methods of the goal-model as well as inter- and intra-system comparison. This model stresses the importance of comparisons of success with other institutions who have similar goals and with earlier success rates of the institution. For example, in the goals-model approach, the researcher may demonstrate that the treatment improved the self-concept of the subjects approximately ten percent. This finding may not be impressive until it is compared with an earlier institutional evaluation which found the treatment decreased self-concept. This evaluation method uses a larger number of variables and includes the influences outside of the institution itself for a more comprehensive understanding. However, this method is used very rarely (only one of the studies reviewed even came close) because much of the information is difficult to find.⁵ Broader methods of evaluation should be considered because of the complications surrounding correctional research.

Research in corrections faces many obstacles to success, unfortunately. There is a tremendous need for the institutions to commit themselves to a valid analysis of treatment. Over one thousand adolescents were committed to the Virginia Department of Corrections last year and this number is increasing.⁶ However, a systematic overview of treatment success is lacking. Research cannot be effective unless the institutions educate those involved as to the possible benefits this analysis can bring. On the other hand, the researchers must commit themselves to

looking at alternative methods of research, especially in the area of measurement. Since there are so many inherent problems in research within corrections, caution must be exercised in avoiding problems which can be eliminated. Many of the non-significant results stem from inadequate tests and poor experimental design. Instead of focusing upon all-encompassing treatment programs, a differentiated approach should be attempted. There have been several significant steps taken in this direction, but more studies are needed before correctional institutions can begin changing their approach. Research is particularly needed in half-way house treatments and correctional institutions. Most programs now used are based upon personal theories of the institution's director rather than a systematic research analysis. Further research is also needed in determining the differences between delinquents and nondelinquents and delinquents themselves. Because of the diversity of situations encountered in correctional research, flexibility and wisdom must be used when attempting research within this field.

FOOTNOTES

1. Lipton, D.; Martinson, R. & Wilks, J. The Effectiveness of Correctional Treatment, p. 608.
2. Ibid., p. 604.
3. Ibid., p. 609.
4. Ibid., p. 609.
5. Coates, R.B.; Miller, A.D. & Ohlin, L.E. Diversity in a Youth Correctional System, p. 38-39.
6. Virginia Department of Corrections, Children Committed: Fiscal Year 1981, p. 1.

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